

## FEELINGS ARE A FAMILY AFFAIR

Address by Bert Kruger Smith, before the joint meeting of the Houston ACLD and the Spring Branch ACLD, Oct. 21, 1969

In an era of depersonalization it is vital to talk about feelings and families and the ways in which people relate to one another. John Donne's No Man Is An Island, is true. We need one another as persons and we need each other in families. Particularly in our present society where we do not have aunts and uncles and grandparents and cousins to help in some problem areas, it is important that we consider the nuclear family and its impact.

Feelings really are a family affair. Moods are as contagious as measles. One of the techniques that is used to alter certain feelings is milieu therapy. Basically the theory is that if one wants to be a certain way, he puts himself with people who are models and acts as they do. This method is applicable for all of us.

### Varieties of Families

Patterns of family living are varied. There is no "right" or "wrong" type. However, it is helpful to understand our type of parenthood. Dr. Haim Ginott in Between Parent and Child says the personality of the child is colored by the emotional atmosphere of his home. He lists several kinds of parents. One is the over-protective one who forces his child, in a sense, to live on borrowed ego. This child lacks insight. At the same time that he is wanting independence he feels a sense of dependence and has conflict between dependence and independence. Dr. Ginott then mentions the childish parent who plays with the child the way one would with a toy. The child has to supply all of his delights. Two others he discusses are the seductive parent and the rejecting parent. Finally he talks of one kind of parent---the one perhaps most applicable in cases where children have special problems. This is the overconscientious parent. "This parent is going to make the child happy even if it kills him" says Dr. Ginott.

But he states that children need wise management not based on guilt or martyrdom.

### "Arithmetic"

One might consider a simple arithmetical comparison. For example, there is the subtraction factor. All problems are lessened by sharing. One subtracts from the magnitude of a problem when he is able to share it within a family. Studies by Dr. Erik Erikson show that within the first year and all through his life at home the child is learning trust. The first year is particularly the year of basic trust. There is a kind of safety in trust to be found in a family. Home is, or should be, the one place where the child or adult can bring his troubles, can come with his disappointments, can feel safe and feel accepted, just the way he is. He doesn't have to be the person who succeeds at work, who wins at bridge, or the man who can do something phenomenal in business. He is just a person who is cared about because he is this person and he is loved within the family.

The second arithmetical metaphor is multiplication. In the same way that problems are lessened, joys are multiplied when they are shared. There is a progressive effect to sharing happiness. Probably there could be nothing worse than to have something great happen to one and have no one to care about it, no one with whom to share it.

And finally there is addition-----the addition of concern, of caring demonstrated within a good family.

Many examples of what happens with children who do not have the protection and the warmth of families have been given. One particular study deals with a group of very small children who were taken away from their mothers, who were thought to be unfit. Another group was put in a little nursery near their mothers, who were in prison. (And they were in prison for some of the most dastardly crimes on the books.) And yet, these children who were able to be close to their mothers thrived, while the others did not. A dramatic kind of effect existed simply because these mothers were able to give the child-



ren the emotions that helped them grow and become good adults.

### Feelings are Important

When one can feel secure within a family complex, he is able to stop using emotions in wasteful ways and instead has an abundance of emotional energy for reaching out to others. And this is what we are talking about -- learning in the family to have the kinds of feelings that help everyone to grow to his own capacity and then to have the ability to reach out to others.

One study reported in Psychology Today for September of 1968, shows that the methods of working with a child do not seem to be nearly as important as the feelings of the teachers, of the people who work with the child. Writing on "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," Robert Rosenthal reported on a San Francisco experiment which demonstrates that the chief difference in the progress between one population of children and another "was in the minds of the teachers," Very often it may not be the method but the attention which is given to a person which has a great effect on the way he progresses. One author of a book on prescriptive teaching said that he felt that insisting upon the attendance of children who failed to learn and who, eventually in an unhappy kind of school setting learned that they are incompetent, is really insisting on crippling or handicapping the children, or insisting on mental or physical illness, delinquency, economic dependency and probably another generation of parental ineptitude.

The way family attitudes beget family attitudes in the children may be demonstrated by what happened in a little town in Brazil, where the great product was corn. At the height of the season when the corn came to its ripest, a great big victory celebration was held. The best of the corn was roasted. When the villagers were ready to plant the next year, they had slightly less superior corn which they planted. When it ripened, they took the best of that. In several seasons they had such inferior corn that they were not able to have any decent product and nothing to celebrate.

This is part of what we are saying; that what families do, the feeling tone in a family, the way that children are reared, the sense of adequacy, the feeling of acceptance which they receive, makes them the kind of parents who can or cannot give love. And this whole cycle goes on. A book called Mental Health of Children talked about the fact that the hurt child begets other hurt children who beget other hurt children. So we're talking about generations unfolding.

### The Child Sees Himself

No matter what kind of difficulty a child has, no matter whether it's minor or severe, he grows up with a sense that somehow he cannot do what other children can. He feels that he is not competent. "The Dilemma of a Dyslexic Man" tells the story of a man who realizes what he has missed. He tells about all the feelings he had, that he must be stupid, that there had to be something wrong with him. He still has this feeling of not being really worthwhile; yet he is one of the most creative, thoughtful, imaginative and artistic men one could know.

### Others See the Child

What does the child with a "hidden disability" demonstrate to others? The youngster who wears a brace, walks on crutches, or has a cast on his arm evokes sympathy in everybody who passes. Anyone will stop and help him. But let the child be one with a serious learning disability, a child who is emotionally disturbed. He can be on the street or on the floor of the house in a catastrophic collapse or having a tantrum, and people say, "Why that spoiled brat. His parents ought to pick him up and give him a good swat." Or, "I know what I would do if he were mine." Nobody feels a sense of sympathy for this child who is just out of control because he has not been able to achieve and who is so frustrated he cannot endure it.

How do children tell us that something is wrong? They do not have any way to speak except through their



behavior. Perhaps that is why it is said that a child never needs love so much as when he seems most unlovable. How does he behave? He acts out; he is hyperactive; he's into everything. Or else, he's withdrawn. Either he is withdrawn only to the extent that the parent is thankful for the quiet or he has really been so hurt that he withdraws all the way and one can hardly reach him at all. Maybe he seems totally indifferent to anything one says.

### What Does He Need?

What does this child need at this moment and from all the moments thereafter? First of all, what he needs, and most particularly in the family, is someone who sees him for himself, who sees him as a child, who is able to look beyond his disability and to see his ability, who is able to look beyond his behavior and see his areas of wellness. There are areas of wellness in the sickest person. We are finally learning to work with those healthy aspects of people.

If we are going to talk about how the child sees himself and how the parents see him, we cannot forget the siblings—particularly if the family has only one child with a learning disability or some other kind of disorder. The sibling's need for recognition in their own right must be recognized. One physician working with young drug addicts said that it wasn't the taking of drugs that bothered so much. It was the fact that young people were expecting to live life without having to meet crisis. He stated that maturity consisted of the mastering of crisis. Competent adults have learned that crises have to be met and that problems have to be solved. That is how people mature.

### What Do Parents Feel?

Parents of all children have guilt feelings. If the child is a member of Phi Beta Kappa they may think, "My, but he's clumsy on the dance floor." And if the child is really a wonderful average student and well-adjusted, they may think, "If I had just tried a little bit harder, I'm sure that she would have been an A student." Every parent has his feelings that he hasn't quite measured up to all that he

should have done.

This parental guilt which is a familiar phenomenon has its roots in reality. But it can lead to nothing but decay unless it is recognized and used realistically.

Sometimes guilt begets guilt. It keeps on. One feels resentment toward his child and then feels guilty because of the felt resentment and then feels guilty over the guilt feelings. This guilt can be compounded in geometric progression until one is nothing but guilt.

A second emotion which parents feel is grief. Arthur Mandelbaum of the Menninger Foundation, a social worker, found out that when parents first learn that their child is deviant, they often enter into a real period of mourning. These parents grieve because in a sense they feel that they have lost the child. They have lost the dream, the child that they hoped to have.

In addition to guilt and grief, parents often feel a great sense of strain, frustration, and anger which may carry over into the marriage relationship. It is very hard to be angry unless one has someplace to put this emotion. Who is more convenient than one's spouse? It takes a great deal of maturity and sometimes other kinds of help for the parents in order that they can be able to accept together this problem of a "different" child.

Sometimes this conflict comes through because the mother has a misplaced sense of martyrdom, and she may, because of her own guilt, take over total care of the child. She has no more time for the husband, for siblings, or for anything else. Then the father retreats. Because the father retreats, the mother resents the fact that he never helps. And so they go, downhill.

Sometimes, even if these feelings are not apparent, the relationship is strained by the emotions that both parents carry within them. Somehow or other each one thinks maybe it really must have been his fault that the child has problems.

Finally-and this is not often recognized openly-parents sometimes carry a death wish for a child who has a very serious problem. These parents wouldn't feel so guilty if they realized that everyone carries many degrees of sen-



sations of love and hate toward one another. The people we love the most we are the most capable of hating. Kahlil Gibram said it more beautifully about joy and sorrow. "Joy and sorrow come from the self-same well. The deeper that sorrow carves into your soul the more joy you can contain." In the same way if one invests deeply in someone, in a mate in particular, he is going to feel deeply; he is going to love deeply; he is very vulnerable to other kinds of reactions and emotions.

One other emotion that is not often discussed is jealousy. Parents with "different" children often have a sense of envy for all their friends who have "normal" offspring. Then they feel a little guilty because of their jealousy and the guilt compounds itself. This guilt is a very unproductive, unrewarding, stagnant river that is filled with all kinds of decay and all kinds of bad feelings.

### What Can Be Done?

How can some of these emotions be turned into an active stream that will harness energy for productivity? What are some of the strengths that are developed by many of these special families?

(1) The first one is to make use of guilt. Part of man's humanity is, his willingness to act against his guilt feelings in productive ways. The question really isn't how much guilt a person feels but rather how he uses it.

(2) The second is to band together with others who share comparable problems. Miracles have been performed just through groups like yours who have been able to take the needs and to provide for their own children and others. In the State of Texas volunteers who were concerned have helped to pass effective legislation on behalf of children.

(3) The third way in handling this kind of guilt is obtaining professional aid if one needs it.

(4) The fourth and last point for dealing with emotions

is to remain whole persons, even while caring for the child with problems.

If feelings are a family affair, what happens to the child who sees Mother tired and Dad tied down and the family at odds and everyone unhappy and tense? What does he feel? "How much trouble I am." "What a lot of difficulty I make." "How hard this is on my parents." "How can I do this to them?" Will he ever grow up with a feeling that he can be a whole person, having dragged down two loving parents this way all his life? There are parents who really neglect all other aspects of living. They serve their own neurotic needs by becoming doormats for their children.

It is important for parents to work through their negative emotions and to utilize their energies in positive ways with their own families and with the family of man.

The story is told that the painter Renoir suffered so terribly from arthritis that to paint was torture for him. His pupil Matisse came into the studio one day and found Renoir with the paintbrushes strapped to his wrist because he couldn't use his fingers. In great agony he was painting a magnificent picture. And Matisse said, "Sir, if you find it so painful, why do you continue to work like this?" And Renoir turned to him and he replied, "Don't you understand? The pain will soon be gone, but the beauty will last."

The pain of the discovery of our children's problems dissipates as we work together in families to create an atmosphere of concern, of hope, and of maturity. Then the beauty of helping each other grow to his greatest potential lasts. And this feeling carries through to new generations. The warmth of this relationship within families remains because feelings are a family affair.